

## PLURICENTRICITY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE: CONCERNS & RESOLUTION IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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### ABSTRACT

*English being an international language, the inevitable pluricentricity of English raises concerns and seeks resolutions. The purpose of this study is to address the dilemma of the Indian students regarding which English to follow – British, American or Indian. The paper analyses the idiosyncrasies of Indian English with its complex multilingual situation that makes it unintelligible to native speakers. To work towards mutual intelligibility, the Indian speaker needs to develop a neutral accent, linguistic competence, understanding of situational context and familiarization with the language while the native speaker needs to develop an attitude of tolerance and respect for the inevitable differences due to pluricentricity of English. Codification of Indian English is a giant step forward to give it an identity for wider acceptance. Conscious awareness of the usage of Indian English and its variation from British and American English will equip the Indian students for better mutual intelligibility in different scenarios.*

**KEYWORDS:** Indian English, Idiosyncrasies, Intelligibility & “Pluricentricity” of English

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### INTRODUCTION

The English language which was established in India as a result of British imperialism over a period of time has emerged as a non native variety called Indian English which operates in its particular social and cultural context. Today, English has been labeled as a global language, an international language, a world language, and world lingua franca, and its spread across the globe has given it the status of a medium that is inevitably essential to place one on an international platform. The purpose of this study is to analyse the idiosyncrasies of Indian English that make it unintelligible to British and American English speakers. To avoid this intelligibility failure, the Indian students studying the English language find it difficult to decide if they must adopt the British Received Pronunciation or American Pronunciation to be considered well spoken and intelligible. A few voices are also raised to uphold the veracity of Indian English with respect to the growing recognition of new English varieties amongst the speakers of this world language today. To discover recourse to this dilemma, we need to review the different alternatives, the concept of intelligibility and the need and possibility of an Indian speaker to be able to speak like a native speaker.

### Status of English in India

The position of English in India is empowering as it is considered the language of prestige and power that opens doors for fulfillment of all aspirations and as a symbol of opportunities for a better life. Such is the glamour that accompanies it that parents at all social levels stretch beyond their means to teach their children in English

medium schools. The knowledge of English acts as a binding force among the multilingual states in India. Beyond that, it showers an elite status and students who aspire for wider horizons look up to the two main native varieties, British English and American English as the models that have held sway in terms of standards. Generally, English may be categorized into two varieties: one spoken primarily by the native speakers of English and second, that is spoken by the second language learners of English. In India, the variety of English spoken is termed to be the non native variety because English doesn't belong here and was brought as a foreign language which has now made an authoritative position in the Indian multilingual setting.

### **Which English?**

The very question of 'which English?' arises out of different approaches towards the language. Some aspire to acquire native standards, and leave no stone unturned as they invest in specially designed courses for spoken English conducted by native speakers. Their only dilemma is whether they should follow the British or American English. But, there is another section of students who think that they would not like to undermine the sociolinguistic and cultural realities of their non-native environment and would be proud to speak Indian English.

This debate has been going on for years. As quoted in Atechi (2004), to outline these trends Geeraerts (2003) identifies two models: the Romantic and the Rationalist models, respectively. The Romantic model is upheld by Prator (1968) and Quirk (1990) who believe that English as a world language should remain a monolith and international intelligibility will only be guaranteed if a single standard is maintained. Braj Kachru has opposed this view vehemently through his works. Anne Pakir (1997) joins Kachru by reiterating that, "we have to accept the inevitable "pluricentricity" of English (Kachru 1996), rather than carrying on with the tradition that there can only be a duo-centricity (viz., the British or the American centres of linguistic hegemony)". Atechi also cites a scene reported by Bamgbose (1998) in 1984, at the conference held in London to mark the 50th anniversary of the British. He described how Lord Randolph Quirk argued in favour of a global standard to ensure international intelligibility while Professor B. Kachru who believes that English as an international language cannot be monopolized argued in favour of the legitimacy and equality of Englishes in the three concentric circles.

### **Intelligibility**

Irrespective of the variety of English one speaks, the issue that needs to be attended to is whether it is understood by the person spoken to or not; this being the very purpose of communication. Intelligibility means that the listener should understand at a given time in a given situation and be able to respond to the speaker appropriately so that communication is effective. We need to discuss this on two levels- intranational and international. On the intranational level, when people from different parts of India interact in English, the complex multilingual situation of India makes it difficult for a standard variety of English to be established. Transfer from Indian languages like Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Telugu etc through interference of mother tongue leads to Indianisation of English. The phonological features that identify Indian English pose some problems for Indians while interacting with each other but it certainly affects intelligibility with native speakers to a great extent.

### **Idiosyncrasies of Indian English**

Indian English pronunciation as described by Bansal (1990) is distinguished with a lack of aspiration in the word-initial position. The entire series of English alveolar consonants tend to be replaced by retroflex consonants. English

alveolar /t/ is articulated as the Indian retroflex /t/ or as the dental /t/ in different phonological environments; the consonants /p/, /t/, and /k/ tend to be unaspirated. For example words like pet and cook are pronounced as /pet/ and /kuk/; not as *p<sup>h</sup>et* and *k<sup>h</sup>uk*; /v/ and /w/ are not distinguished (*west* and *vest* are often homophones).

Many speakers of Indian English do not use the consonant, /ʒ/ but use /dʒ/ or /z/ instead, for example. *treasure* /'treɪzə:t/, and in the south Indian variants, with /ʃ/ e.g. *treasure* /'treʃə:t/. In many cases, /dʒ/ is used for /z/ e.g. zero and cosy sound as /'dʒi:ro/ and /'ko:dʒi:/ (the latter, especially in the North).

Most Indian speakers use /t̪/ and /d̪/, for /θ/ and /ð/. For example, "thin" would be spoken as [t̪hɪn] instead of /θɪn/. Many Indians also pronounce /f/ as aspirated voiceless bilabial plosive [p<sup>h</sup>] e.g. *phail* for *fail*. People from the state of Bihar speak /s/ for /ʃ/ whereas people from Bengal speak /ʃ/ for /s/.

While retaining /ŋ/ in the final position, many Indian speakers add the /g/ sound after it when it occurs in the middle of a word. For example, /rɪŋɪŋ/ is spoken as /rɪŋɪŋg/ (ringing) Syllabic /l/, /m/, /n/ are usually replaced by the VC clusters [əl], [əm] and [ən] (as in *button* /'bʊtən/). In West Indian English a consonant is omitted or the last consonant is dropped in a cluster to alleviate the weight of the syllable *ban* (band), *ban* (banned), *laugh* (laughed), *scream* (screamed). Some Panjabi speakers tend to insert /ə/ to break consonant clusters like *bottle*, *trouble*, *help*, *strong*, etc: /bɒ<sup>1</sup>təl/, [tə<sup>1</sup>rəbəl], [hɛ<sup>1</sup>ləp], [sə<sup>1</sup>trɔ: ɪ]. In the state of Uttar Pradesh, before the initial clusters beginning with /s/ the speakers prefix the vowel /i/ *smile*, *stool* are pronounced as /i<sup>1</sup>smail/, /i<sup>1</sup>stu:l/

There is lack of distinction between long and short vowels as /bɪt/ and /bi:t/; /fʊl/ and /fu:l/; /ʃɒt/ and /ʃɔ:t/ (*bit/ beat*, *full/fool*, *shot/ short*)

Indian English very often retains the vowel indicated by the spelling, even in unaccented prefixes and suffixes. Examples: *bravest* /<sup>1</sup>bre:vɛst/, *completed* /k əm<sup>1</sup>plɪ:tɛd/, *position*

/pɔ:<sup>1</sup>z ɪʃən/<sup>3</sup>

*The schwa* is not used correctly as a result of which you hear words in which it is replaced by /æ/ sound e.g. *England*, *breakfast*

Diphthongs tend to be spoken as monophthongs and the second element in a diphthong is not pronounced e.g. /geɪt/ (*gate*) is pronounced with a long /e:/ vowel and no glide from /e/ to /i/ ; /ʊə/ is spoken as /o:/ as in *home* ; /ɪə/ is replaced by /i:/ in words like *serious* ( first syllable) and /ɛə/ is replaced by /e:/ in words like *area*.

Chiefly in states like Punjab, Haryana the short /e/ becomes lengthened to /æ/ to make /pen/ sound like /pæn/ and in Bengal /e/ is pronounced as /e:/ e.g. *pen* as *pain*, *chest* as *chaste*. Telugu speakers do not use the diphthongs /eə/ and /ʊə/ but replace them with /e:r/ and /u:r/ in words like *fair* and *poor*.

Indian English often uses strong vowels in unstressed syllables or words. For example, "baggage" may be pronounced /baeɡe:dʒ/ rather than /baeɡɪdʒ/. A word such as "*was*" in the phrase "I was going" will be pronounced /vɒz/ or /vas/ in Indian English. In most other accents it would receive the unstressed realization /wəz/.

Indian English tends to be syllable rather than stress-timed. Indian-English speakers usually speak with a syllabic rhythm and so put the stress accents at the wrong syllables, or accentuate all the syllables of a long English word. Example, *develop* with stress on the first syllable sounds like 'double up', 'important' with stress on the first syllable sounds like 'impotent', *Engineer* is pronounced with stress on /dʒ/ rather than the first syllable. Hence the most frequent causes of

unintelligibility in Indian English are wrong word stress, wrong sentence stress and rhythm, incorrect vowel length and lack of aspiration in voiceless plosives.

On the morphological level, Indian English has created many terms and usages. Indian English uses compound formation like *cousin- brother* and *cousin sister* which allows them to specify the exact relation. Indians also pluralize many English mass nouns which results in words like *woods*, *furnitures*, *informations* etc. Some other examples are *key bunch*, *chalk piece* instead of '*bunch of keys*', and '*piece of chalk*' respectively. Indian English speakers also shorten the commonly used terms such as *prof.* for professor.

The use of article *a*, *an*, and *the* is such that Indian English speakers tend to inconsistently drop articles where necessary and add where not necessary. This mainly happens because of the absence of the article system in Indian languages.

In case of prepositions, errors like dropping prepositions when necessary, inserting where not necessary, and using wrong prepositions occur.

Subject auxiliary inversion in question formation is also an important feature of Indian English. Indian English speakers do not necessarily change the position of subject and auxiliary in forming WH question. For example, *Where you would like to go?* *Who you would like to go with?* In Yes/No questions as well, subject auxiliary inversion rule is not followed, instead they use intonation to the structure of the statement to make it sound like a question e.g. *You will go?* With a rising tone at the end, the statement is sounded like a question. Agreement with the form, not the content of a question: A. *You didn't do it?* B: *Yes, I didn't; Hasn't the Chairman left for Australia?* The Indian answer is: *Yes, he hasn't left for Australia* whereas the native speaker would have replied: *Yes, he has left for Australia / No, he hasn't left for Australia.*

A very pronounced effect of Hindi on English grammar is the use of the progressive aspect with habitual actions, completed actions, and stative verbs. This produces sentences such as *"I am playing this game often"* rather than *"I play this game often"*; *"Where are you studying from?"* instead of *"Where have you studied from?"*; *"She was having six cars"* rather than *"She had six cars"* and *"She is knowing the answer"*.

Use of 'no' and the tag 'isn't it' at the end of the sentence is very frequent. For example *"you are coming, no", we are going isn't it?"*

The use of *"only"* and *"itself"* is also very frequent in English language used in India. For example *"I was in Delhi only"*, *"We can meet today itself"*. This can be the influence of Hindi *"hi"*.

Hindi verbs like *"dena"* and *"lena"* have highly influenced the English language spoken in India. For example, speaker of English in India will frequently say *"I have to give exam"* instead of *"I have to write the exam"*.

Literal translation from expressions in Hindi. Example *'today morning'* (*aaj subhah*) or *'yesterday night'* (*kal raat*) to mean this morning and last night.

The use of reduplication of words to emphasize something is usually used in the Indian context. Some of the expressions like *"Come come! Sit sit!"* is used for emphasizing some action. Reduplication can also replace 'very' for intensifying or extending something, as in *"small small children"* *"cold, cold breeze"* and *"curly curly hair."*

### Intelligibility with Whom?

Many scholars agree that intelligibility is relative as it depends on the participants in communication. There is no doubt that these Indianisms coupled with variation in pronunciation, stress and intonation definitely affect intelligibility when an Indian communicates with a native speaker. But what is difficult to understand is that Indian intellectuals who are convinced that they speak the Received Pronunciation are not understood by a native speaker. It has been observed that the services of Indian engineers, doctors, university professors, etc. in Britain, due to intelligibility problems, are restricted to the Indian community. As a result of the difficulties in communication between Indian doctors and their patients outside of India, the British National Health service now conducts a language proficiency test in addition to a test on medical competence for overseas doctors who apply for practise in Britain.

### Why Unintelligibility?

#### *Cline of Intelligibility*

Is it possible for an Indian English speaker to equal native English speaker and should he aspire for that, is a question that would interest the Indian students who try to adopt the British / American pronunciation. The problem of unintelligibility of Indians or non native speakers of English as stated above may be reviewed by considering what Kachru calls “cline of intelligibility.” A bilingual person is one who is capable of communicating in the second language and in the first language to a varying extent. Kachru (2015) ranks bilinguals on the basis of their proficiency in English by using an arbitrary scale called the Cline of Bilingualism. The scale is divided into three measuring points: the ZERO point, the CENTRAL point, and the AMBILINGUAL point. The zero point, in India is not at the bottom because people have some competence in some restricted form of English even though they may rank below zero in their ability to use the language. These people just above the zero point are considered *minimal* bilinguals as they have insufficient proficiency and may not be intelligible even to users of educated Indian English. At the central point, which is again an arbitrary point, we may find a bilingual who has studied English as a major subject, has *adequate* competence in one or more registers of Indian English and is able to make use of the language effectively in those restricted fields. Kachru describes a STANDARD (or educated) Indian English bilingual as one who is intelligible not only to other Indians in different parts of the sub-continent, but to the educated native speakers of English too. However, this user's command of English does not equal that of the native speaker. Kachru considers “bilingualism a rare, if not impossible phenomenon, and to become an ambilingual may not necessarily be the goal of a bilingual. In Indian English, we may then imagine a scale of bilingualism running from absolute monolingualism at one end, through varying degrees of bilingualism, to absolute ambilingualism at the other end.” So Indian English speakers may be high on the scale but they can't match the native speaker. There are some Indians who have “native-like control”<sup>5</sup> at one level, but at the other levels their English may show marked influence of their language. For example, at the grammatical level one may attain an ambilingual's command, and at the same time show marked Indianness at the phonological and lexical levels. I believe that the only ones who can match the native speaker are Indians who are born and raised in that environment such that English almost becomes their first language and their mother tongue the second language for them (as it is only used in their home environment).

#### *Language Reflects Socio-Cultural Experience*

To carry the Indian psyche and sociocultural experience in a meaningful way, Indian English imbibes the characteristic flavor. The renowned Indian English writer, Rao (1938) comments

*The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our Indian expression... We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly, and when we move we move quickly. There must be something in the sun of India that makes us rush and tumble and run on.*

But this fast speech along with its characteristic features affects intelligibility. Such a feature can certainly be taken care of as it is believed that Indians tend to become unintelligible as they speak too fast.

The Indian English speaker carrying his sociocultural genes is often compelled to borrow words from the native language in order to convey the flavour of his mother tongue. Sometimes, when Indian phrases / expressions are created or idioms are translated literally, the native speaker is not able to understand. For example, Enthuf for enthusiasm, fundas for fundamentals, muskafy means to flatter somebody, prepone (like postpone). A vendor might call his/her female customer—sister (without any reference to kinship). “Sudha, eat properly”; refers to quantity; with no reference to table manners as would be inferred. When an Indian literally translates an idiom and says that a monkey does not know the taste of ginger, it would be difficult to understand that he means casting pearls before swines. Similarly, certain speech patterns of a native speaker which are a part of polite conversation may be easily misinterpreted by an Indian. For example, when a native speaker says “Could we consider some other options?” the Indian thinks he has not decided yet whereas he means that he doesn’t like the idea. When he says “it is a brave proposal,” the Indian thinks he is admiring his courage whereas he means “You are insane.”

### **Efforts to Facilitate Intelligibility**

Substantial research has been done by scholars across the globe to prove that it would be unrealistic to impose native standards in non native settings. In spite of the multilingual diversity in India that shapes Indian English, it is the similarity of milieu and needs that helps them to comprehend the embedded differences. The endeavor to overcome mother tongue influences and cultivate a neutral accent as is being done by a number of people or at least such awareness is a step in the right direction. However, international intelligibility, which is a matter of great concern for speakers across the globe is a process of give and take and cannot be seen from the traditional one-sided perspective. Having understood the characteristics of Indian English and the constraints of an Indian speaker, it would certainly be worthwhile to explore the factors that could help in mutual intelligibility of native and Indian speaker. An Indian, as a listener needs to have adequate knowledge of the rules of the language and develop linguistic competence for better comprehensibility. An understanding of the situational context would certainly enhance intelligibility even though certain isolated words may not be understood at times. Practically speaking, familiarity with the language and the way it is used plays a prominent role as the speakers become familiar with one another’s speech. In fact, intelligibility improves over a period of time as the participants in speech adjust their speech according to requirement.

To work towards mutual intelligibility, we need to look at this scene. The native speaker who finds difficulty in understanding the speech of the Indian says, “You have an accent;” it mostly reflects an unconscious and social reflection of bias and power and is meant to mean, “You are different from me and I am better than you are.” On the contrary, he needs to develop an attitude of tolerance and respect for the differences which are inevitable.

This certainly won’t be enough and I agree with those scholars who see codification of non-native varieties as a giant step forward. The acceptance, recognition and consequent codification of the Indian variety will clearly define which aspects of it are errors and which can be called features that mark it as a variety in its own right. This clarification is vital to

the issue of intelligibility.

Before we declare users of Indian English as low proficient users on account of deviations which are naturally interpreted as errors, it is important to determine when a linguistic deviation from a standard norm should be considered an error to be eradicated or a feature of the new variety (innovation) to be accepted. The next relevant question in this context is how do we determine the difference between an error and a genuine innovation? I agree with Schneider (2007) who concurs, that “from a strictly linguistic perspective, it would make sense to establish the careful usage of the educated members of a society as the target and as an indigenous language norm”, suggesting that future research should focus on the educated elite as being representative of the particular society as a whole. Once these features are determined, they should be codified. This would help to decide which linguistic deviation from the standard norm should be considered an error to be eradicated or a feature of the new variety (innovation) to be accepted. B. B. Kachru (1983b) explains further by focusing on the linguistic processes that produce the new form. An error is due to random processes, whereas a true innovation “is the result of a productive process which marks the typical variety-specific features; and it is systematic within a variety, and not idiosyncratic. There is thus an explanation for each deviation within the context of situation.”

## CONCLUSIONS

This article has brought out the importance of English in India in today's scenario because it provides the individuals with opportunities which will enhance their future social and economic prospects internationally. To address the dilemma of Indian students as to which English they must speak- British, American or Indian, the primary issue must be intelligibility. Idiosyncrasies of Indian English, along with socio cultural experiences that shape it affect intelligibility with native speakers. Since it is unrealistic to impose native standards in non native settings, international intelligibility should not be seen from the traditional one-sided perspective but accept the inevitable “pluricentricity” of English. To work towards mutual intelligibility the native speaker needs to develop an attitude of tolerance, sensitivity and respect for the differences which are inevitable while an Indian needs to develop linguistic competence for better comprehensibility, familiarity with the language and codification of Indian English which will be a giant step. This is a herculean task which can be satisfactorily built on corpus data but will need substantial time to establish its identity. Till that time, I would suggest my Indian students to be aware of the usage of Indian English in their particular context and understand how it varies from British and American English to equip them for better intelligibility in different scenarios.

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